

The Hundred-year-old National Library's Speech to Future Generations

Dear Colleagues, Good Friends!

First of all, I wish to thank you all who have come to attend this conference to celebrate the centennial of the National Library of Estonia. It is very important to us that so many colleagues from abroad, from different parts of the world have come to share their joy and thoughts with us – we have guests from 28 countries. Thank you so much! I hope that the conference and the days spent here in Estonia will prove to be meaningful and pleasant.

SLAID (RK hoone)

The National Library of Estonia was established as a parliamentary library on the 21st of December 1918 – the same year the independent Republic of Estonia was founded. It can be said that the history of no other library in Estonia has been to such extent entwined with the political history of the Estonian society as it is the history of the National Library.

The building of the National Library, where we are at this very moment and which was opened to the public twenty-five years ago, also carries symbolic value. The building that only one month ago was designated as a protected cultural property, recalls our people the years of the restoration of independence of Estonia, the Singing Revolution. But in what way does the National Library relate to the modern world, the modern society, and how does it address today's generations and might address the future generations – these are the questions I am trying to answer here.

The lack of noise can be inspiring

It has been said that the Estonians are book people. For example, the fact about our home libraries supports the saying. *The Guardian* recently published an article about the research that revealed that Estonians came in first regarding the number of books on their shelves at home. An average Estonian has 218 books at home. Thinking about our home libraries, a beloved Estonian writer and semiotician, Valdur Mikita, has described the prototype of a happy human as „a person who in the summer evening sits in the middle of a total chaos of one's grandmother's home library, wearing socks with holes in their heels, and has lost one's mobile phone.“

What way should it concern a national library? I am of the opinion that the metaphor of the prototype of a happy human, proposed by Mikita, in a way, sets an example for designing the physical space of a modern library. How?

The figurative expression gives a hint of the idea of a natural, homely environment, where a person can let one's thoughts wander. The metaphor of the mobile phone refers, in turn, to noise. As a counterbalance to the world full of noise – and noise may, of course, appear both in the forms of information, sound, image, as well as light –, noiseless areas are gaining value. I am referring not to entire silence but the lack of noise.

I am convinced that it is the library space that should be among those noiseless areas. Proceeding from that, our library has set itself a goal to offer an inspiring library space, which, in turn, provides space for new ideas and creation.

Openness

And proceeding from this knowledge, we have formulated **the vision of the National Library of Estonia for the coming years – to be** the library of a new generation and the developer of librarianship ideas by providing an open, inspiring, and engaging environment for activities.

However, the word *openness* has a special meaning in this context. Openness is one of the basic values of libraries that supports the mission of the library as an institution providing free access to information for everybody. At the same time we are aware that the carrying out of this mission can be interpreted in several ways. For instance, in the case of national libraries, there has existed the dilemma between the long-term preservation of cultural heritage and making the collections available. The digital age has diminished this contradiction a lot and, at the same time, brought along revising the ideas of the library as a space and the space as a service. In the course of this revision process and following the example of many libraries, the National Library of Estonia has also been striving to achieve greater openness.

Here, I would like to recall a past incident. Ten years ago, when the National Library launched its home lending service of books published after WW II, a manager of one of Estonian public libraries asked me whether we were going to compete with public libraries. Back then, I thought that this was meant to be a reproach. Today I take it for a compliment, because the National Library has advanced in huge steps making its collections easily available.

Vanishing boundaries on a library landscape. Post-digital era

And if we take a look at the direction in which the libraries are developing, then the boundaries between libraries of different types are not so clearly definable as they were some decades ago. The role and tasks of the library as an institution have considerably changed. Libraries are more and more regarded as powers that create and connect communities. Partnerships with libraries and memory institutions are especially important. We are becoming a central service development institution for Estonian libraries. To date, the developments include the e-publications lending environment, the digital archive of Estonian publications, an innovative system of interlibrary lending, and one information system for all Estonian libraries.

Libraries have reached the post-digital era, which focuses on the human being. It means that for library users it is not important who is the owner of any digital channel or information system, they are interested in the service received through this channel which helps to solve their problems.

Image as an obstacle. A long journey of changing the image

The road to openness has not been easy, overcoming one barrier at a time. The National Library's unique, extremely important task of the preserver of cultural heritage and the architecture of its building that reminds of a fortress have shaped the library's image a lot. It is the image of a dignified institution, a closed membership club, if you please, where not everyone is welcomed. And this image is difficult to change in spite of all the efforts. Let me give you an example – I spoke to an official from the Finance Ministry about the remodelling of the library building that will start next year. Her reaction illustrates the image quite well. I told her about the idea to erect a separate storage facility outside the main library building. The ministry's official wanted to know if the building of the National Library would not hold stacks any more, then what would remain to be housed there at all.

Today we can state that there are neither physical nor virtual barriers that restrict entrance to the library. Nevertheless, the physical library space must support openness in any possible way. So, we have tried to redesign in that spirit certain areas in the library's building that would help to overturn the previously described image of the National Library as a closed institution.

Perhaps it is a surprise to many, but the entrance might turn out to be a crucial obstacle to entering the library - this serves as a good example of areas that needed improving in our library. The visitors of this building frequently asked where did the library begin in this building. We redesigned the entrance area to the library, applying service design methods. The result is clearly visible and works well. Differences can be vividly seen on these slides.

(2 slaidi – enne ja pärast)

Let's rebuild!

As mentioned previously, we are waiting for the realisation of a wonderful opportunity to remodel the building complex of the National Library into a modern, inspiring cultural and educational centre in the coming years. The vision of the new centre is to be the heart of Estonian humanities that consolidates into one single centre the provision of services to state authorities which have similar functions. In the future, the departments of the National Archive of Estonia that are located in Tallinn will be housed in this building. It will provide an opportunity to offer new services on the basis of the emerging synergy and to improve the quality of services provided to already existing target groups.

Library's assets – collections and data

In the context of modern research library, including the national library, the data-centred approach rather than the collection-centred approach is used while dealing with the library's assets. The Estonian Legal Deposit Copy Act, in force since 2017, requires the publishers to submit to the National Library an output-ready file of a publication published. In that way, the amount of data in the digital archive of the National Library is growing in addition to digitised collections and the Web archive. And the capacity of the library's digital content depends on the capability to provide services that make these data available and enable to process them. Today we offer a bulk of digital content as open data and the development of digital humanities services is in progress. Nevertheless, we have to admit that, at the present maturity level, the library's role in teaching people how to use (open) data should increase.

Supporting e-governance

The library is becoming increasingly important foothold for the citizens of e-governed state.

It should be mentioned here that Estonia holds sixteenth position among 193 countries in the United Nations' E-government Development Index, Denmark leads the Index.

If we take a look at the Estonian e-governance, then the e-governance has made a bulk of data open, but there still is an undiscovered potential in showing how to understand and profit from these. That in turn, in connection with e-governance services, leads us to the important role of libraries – to support users with digital competencies. By employing digitally competent librarians, the libraries of e-governed state have an opportunity to assist the citizens in using the state's e-services and support other communication with the state.

Digital competencies

So, libraries are facing a never-ending work in developing the digital competences of their staff, who, in turn, will teach the library users, the citizens of e-governed state. A number of development possibilities for using the data also depend on the acquired digital competencies. The national library has a big opportunity to learn in this field and pass on the knowledge it has gained.

Changing the way of thinking

A great change has taken place in our way of thinking. The National Library is no longer collection-centred, not only carrying out the mission to preserve cultural heritage, but is also

human-centred, customer-centred. Our goals are to make collections available as much as possible, to address our users, and to provide an inspiring environment via the library space. As we know, changing the way of thinking and attitudes is the most time-consuming and difficult part of making any kind of changes. I can be proud of our national library, as today we all know that the purpose of our activities is to serve our library user in the best possible way.

To sum up

One of the strategic focuses of the National Library in the recent years is titled „The Story of the Collection“. This is a word game that urges us to tell stories on the basis of our collections in addition to collecting books. This is a weighty task and, at the same time, a serious challenge. In fact, we are talking about the ways how the National Library can address today's generation and new generations, tell meaningful stories.

We have used a metaphor of bridge while drawing up our library's mission. We aim to create a bridge between knowledge and people. A bridge that every new generation will build again and what will become stronger, more telling and significant by every generation.